

Baby café

Breast-feeding moms get new support center

By Doug Pullen / El Paso Times

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From left, Maribel Ramirez, Kathy Nuwayhid and... (Photos by Adriane Jaeckle / El Paso Times)



EL PASO -- Christina is a 26-year-old mother-to-be. She's due Dec. 13. She's going to have a boy.

And she's going to breast-feed him.

So, she was more than happy to find out about the El Paso Baby Café, a free drop-in support center for women like her.

It open from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Thursday at 5302 Montana, in the Chelmont Shopping Center. It will be open Tuesdays and Thursdays, but hours may expand down the line.

A place like the Baby Café can only help new moms like Christina, who want to feed their children naturally.

"My sister did it with her son, and he's a very healthy baby. She's never had a problem with him, not even fussiness when he's going to sleep," said Christina, who preferred not to give her last name for this story.

"I heard," she added, "that it's the best form of nutrition."

She won't get any argument from the health professionals who are opening only the second Baby Café in the United States.

"In every possible way it's better for the baby, especially premature babies, and there are many benefits for the mom," said Lizabeth Berkeley, a lactation consultant and educator with Texas Tech University's Health Sciences Center who led the effort.

Both the World Health Organization and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend breast-feeding for the first six months and up to two years. It is considered the best source of nourishment for infants, and it's important in fighting disease.

Berkeley is one of a half-dozen lactation specialists

in a city she said should have "hundreds." She's also part of the group that read about the Baby Café concept in England, where there are dozens of them, and applied for a charter from the Baby Café Charitable Trust. The only other Baby Café in the United States is in suburban Boston. There are 136 around the world, mostly in the United Kingdom.

She saw a need, noting that the number of woman who breast-feed has declined over the past 40 years, especially among poor women. The number of women who breast-feed during initiation, or immediately after their babies are born, is about 65 percent to 70 percent in the area, she said, but the problems with duration -- the numbers decline once they leave the hospital.

"Every one of those moms wants to breast-feed. They understand it's good for their babies. They don't necessarily understand it's good for them. They don't understand that formula's not," said Berkeley, noting that there's a general lack of information available to many women, especially low-income mothers.

Many try but quit because they have pain or think the baby's not getting enough milk.

"We're not good at teaching women," Berkeley said. "There's no help, no classes, no role models."

Border populations such as ours tend to be poor, and poverty can promote poor health.

"Poverty makes life really hard. People are sicker. Breast-feeding could make up the deficit," she said, noting that it's cheaper than buying formula and aids health, including lowering cancer risks and increasing IQs.

"There's also a psychological wall," said Kathleen Nuwayhid, a volunteer registered nurse who is one of the cafe's directors. "Many women have issues they can't overcome."

There are other pressures, chief among them a society that frowns upon breast-feeding in public.

"Women can wear shirts that show everything but a nipple," Berkeley said, "but they can't breast-feed in public?"

The café is designed to chip away at those fears and give women (and their significant others) an informal, nurturing and supportive environment.

The El Paso Baby Café is an old storefront in the Chelmont Shopping Center.

"Please feel free to breast-feed your baby anywhere you wish," reads a framed sign on a coffee table. There are tables and easy chairs, plans for a children's play area, and a small, private space for those who need it.

"I wish I had this when I was young," said Maribel Ramirez, a certified lactation educator and coordinator of Texas Tech's Baby Friendly Project who runs the Baby Café with Berkeley and Nuwayhid. "There are a lot of women who feel they are alone."

They won't be alone there. The charter requires three certified lactation specialists to be on the premises.

Ramirez said the café's location in Central El Paso should help them reach women who need their help or who are just curious.

"If they're walking by and have a question, they can come in. And if there are dads who want to come in, we are more than happy to have them," Ramirez said.

"Sometimes moms are ready to go crazy," Nuwayhid said. "They need a safe place like this to get away."

The program is funded in part by 15 sponsors, who include Texas Tech, Thomason Hospital, the El Paso City-County Health Department, the Texas Department of State Health Services, the Paso Del Norte Health Foundation, the Laura Bush Institute for Women's Health, March of Dimes and Univision Channel 26.

The women hope the café is just a start. Organizers, who'll host an open house Nov. 13, hope to expand the hours. And they hope other health professionals will open more cafés.

"We're only the second one in the United States," Nuwayhid said. "For El Paso to get this, it's a really big deal."

Doug Pullen may be reached at dpullen@elpasotimes.com; 546-6397.

Information

- **What: El Paso Baby Café.**
- **Where: 5302 Montana in the Chelmont Shopping Center in Central El Paso.**
- **When: 1:30-3:30 p.m. Tuesday and Thursdays (opens Thursday).**
- **How much: Free.**
- **Web site: www.thebabycafe.co.uk.**
- **Information: 799-7239.**